

Lived Experience as Pedagogical Resource: Towards an Auto-ethnographic Pedagogy of Writing

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After reading Deborah Reed-Danahay's *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (1997), I came to believe that auto-ethnography could provide an effective basis for a pedagogy for the teaching of writing. The key element of auto-ethnography, as distinct from memoir and autobiography, is the positioning of the writer within the social, cultural, economic, and political framework of what is being observed. I saw immense value in this positioning for students today, especially newer college students who understand their relationship to higher education differently than the students of ten or twenty years earlier did. My initial sense was that a writing pedagogy based on auto-ethnography would influence not only the students' disposition towards writing, but also the quality of the writing itself. Therefore, I created a writing pedagogy based on auto-ethnographic research methods to try out on a group of college writing students.

I had just started working at a small, relatively new college in New England that was surrounded by several very old and highly regarded colleges and universities. The institution was attempting to increase its profile by, among other things, revamping its writing program and the writing requirements for its required general education curriculum. Both the administration and other faculty members, therefore, placed increasing pressure on the writing faculty to turn out students who were better able to handle the demands of multi-disciplinary, college level writing.

Supported by the Dean and the Chair of the English department, I designed an auto-ethnography based pedagogy that would be piloted in all of the sections of the first course in the first-year writing sequence required of all students. I trained the faculty in the basic methods of auto-ethnography, helped them select materials, and set out to collect data. What follows is an account of the experiences of four students and their writing instructor from this pilot population. This trial supports my initial idea that a pedagogy based on auto-ethnography positively enhances college level writing instruction.

The Pedagogical Case for Auto-ethnography

The argument for the implementation of an auto-ethnographic pedagogy of writing is three-fold. Firstly, by allowing students to write about topics with which they are intimately connected, they will have a stronger stake in the educative process. Secondly, the pedagogy can help students create a bridge to formal academic writing. Thirdly, this pedagogy can be beneficial to all learners regardless of writing proficiency level.

An important concept here is the role of lived experience in the writing classroom. This notion is similar to the idea of “funds of knowledge” as discussed by Moll, Amant, Neff, and Gonzalez, and arguably similar to Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital. An auto-ethnographic writing pedagogy utilizes these sets of knowledge in ways that elevate the student writer to the level of expert. No one knows their experience more than they do and this fosters creative and innovative ways in delivering effective writing instruction.

Another key concept in using an auto-ethnography approach to the teaching of writing is that the students should not only be able to write their stories, but that they should also be able to contextualize their narratives in the social, cultural, and political components of their experience and be able to describe that connection clearly and profoundly. In addition to the experience of writing narratively, the added analytical exercise that goes into considering how everything fits together creates an important exercise in critical thinking.

A further benefit for using a pedagogy that draws on students' lived experience is that it can help them transition more easily to academic conventions of writing. Indeed this reminds us of the decades old debate between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae regarding the place of personal writing in the academy. In her article on the same issue, Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk comes down on the side of Elbow insisting that students' personal language is a necessary vehicle through which academic discourse can be learned.

Victor Turner's theory of liminality can add insight to the present discussion. This theory, in its essential form, considers how the individual navigates the initial stage in a given process, usually thought of as a stage in life or a rite of passage (in traditional cultural terms). Mary Soliday cites the idea of Turner's liminal crossings in the introduction to her piece on literacy narratives, so the notion of liminality is not novel in its pedagogical potential. In pedagogical terms, the entrance to the academy (in this case, our first year writing courses) is considered as a passageway from one stage of life to another. The tentative trials, then, that the students endure as they navigate the academy, serve as a way of moving from one liminal crossing to another. If one understands both the expectations and conventions of writing in the academy and accepts the premise of the theory of liminality, the case for adopting an auto-ethnography pedagogy for the

teaching of writing is made all the more stronger because the auto-ethnography pedagogy creates opportunities for these liminal crossings.

Establishing the ‘Writing Self’

I have argued that a writing pedagogy based on auto-ethnography, by virtue of lived experience, positions the students in proximity to their writing, and that it can serve as a bridge to academic conventions of writing, and that the pedagogy can be used for virtually any writing proficiency level. Later in the paper, I will provide evidence from the data that will substantiate these claims.

First, however, we should examine a connected issue here relating to the development of a writing identity, or the “writing self” which I argue is the result of the accumulative navigations of Turner’s liminal crossings. Roz Ivanic, for instance, considered extra-content aspects to writing and how critical these aspects are to both the writing and the writer. In her seminal book, *Writing and Identity*, Ivanic supports the claim that there is an interplay between writer and subject in which the writer assumes a role by role by aligning themselves with certain socially constructed subject positions or by challenging these positions.

This notion is advanced in Gloria Park’s study of a group of English language learners crafting a cultural and linguistic autobiography in an English as a Second Language classroom. Drawing on the pedagogical implications for life-history writing, Park’s work demonstrates the importance of the relationship between ownership, authorship, and how students’ experiences have a beneficial use in the writing classroom. Another example of this relationship is found in

Kristen Murray Worthington's dissertation. In her study, Worthington considers the question of how student writing helped to shape their identities, what in their experience caused them to write as they did, and finally, what the pedagogical implications of this were. In simple terms, both Park and Worthington find positive relationship between students' writing, identity, and personal experience and the investments they make in the educative process.

As an instructor in composition and other writing-related fields, I have often struggled with ways to teach my students not only how to write for specific academic purposes, but also to write in general. The disconnect between what students already know and what they are often expected to learn and know in the writing classroom has troubled me and has prompted me to pursue other ways to use what students already possess as a pedagogical tool.

As a result of similar frustration, Armstrong, is one scholar who has advocated for an auto-ethnographic approach to teaching by positioning the students' autobiographical narratives in socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts. In his conference paper, Armstrong explains how he adopted this perspective while assessing an autobiographical writing module completed by third year undergraduate university students in the United Kingdom. These students could not bring themselves to personalize their own stories largely because of the conditioning and training they had received which taught them from an early age that being an academic writer meant that one was to remain largely removed from what they were writing. For Armstrong, who had experience with auto-ethnography as a research tool, auto-ethnography is situated learning by its very nature and that, as such, students would benefit from the method just as researchers do.

Patrick Camangian also advocates using auto-ethnography to enhance learning. His article considers auto-ethnography's use as a means of fostering critically caring literacies that enables students to see how they themselves and all of the elements that make up their experiences connect in a way that he believes help them become better critical readers, writers, and oral communicators

A similar example of the potential of an auto-ethnographic based writing pedagogy can be found in Melissa Tombro's text, *Teaching Autoethnography: Personal Writing in the Classroom* (2010). Tombro provides a step-by-step guide on teaching auto-ethnographic writing as well as in-depth examples of the auto-ethnographic writing done by the participants in her study. While clearly geared towards instructors who understand the relationship of personal writing to academic writing, the volume stands, along with Armstrong and Camangian, as one of the few established examples of using the genre in the teaching of writing.

Research Questions

Prior to entering the field I developed the primary guiding question: what would participating in a required writing class based on the principles of auto-ethnography be like for first-year college students?

Once the project was underway, I was able to refine and develop more specific questions based on the themes emerging from the initial analysis:

1. How does the participation in an auto-ethnography based writing pedagogy foster the creation of participants' writing selves?

2. What role might an auto-ethnography based writing curriculum play in developing students' writing confidence?
3. How might students use these tools enhance the quality of their writing?

Methodology

To answer these questions, I designed a multiple case study using the four participants mentioned in the beginning of the paper and their writing instructor. In keeping with noted research methodologist Robert Creswell's criteria for selecting multiple case study, I chose this methodology for the following reasons: the initial research questions, the context, the existence of at least four cases, and the presence of what research methodologist Stake refers to as a "quintain" which binds all of the cases together (i.e., the school, the program, the course, etc.).

Setting/Context

The study was conducted at a small private college in New England. Though private, this school is unique in the area in that it traditionally targeted students that are often classified as "high risk". With the exception of one or two departments, the institution maintains an attitude of open enrollment and recruits local students from underserved backgrounds as well as racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse students from major urban centers in the northeastern United States including Boston and New York City.

The pedagogy was designed as a means of revising the required writing curriculum for incoming students who were increasingly diverse in their preparation for the demands of college

level writing as defined by the college's writing faculty. Because they felt that the previous writing curriculum of the school was outdated, the administration and faculty of the department sought to replace the existing pedagogy. The method of evaluation, student writing portfolios, which had already existed in one form or another, had been the primary form of assessment and would remain the sole method of evaluation of the student's writing at the end of the course, but adapted to accommodate the new curriculum.

The auto-ethnography pedagogy was piloted in all fifteen sections of the first course in the two- course first-year writing program. The basic premise of the pedagogy is that students, through various printed and visual media, would be exposed to a variety of ethnographic or ethnographic-like depictions of various cultures, and would then be asked to create an auto-ethnographic account of what it was like to grow up in their respective social contexts and what that means in terms of who they have become.

Although all of the faculty teaching this course, full and part-time, were trained in the basic components of ethnography and auto-ethnography, the materials used really only needed to have ethnographic qualities. In most cases, instructors also created an operational definition of the term "culture" in collaboration with the students so that everyone in the class would be working from essentially the same perspective on culture. Once instructors selected their materials, which almost always consisted of a book length ethnography or ethnographic-like piece of writing and one feature-length film or a composition of shorter films, the instructors began teaching their courses.

Through a series of shorter in-class writings and journal writings, instructors frequently asked students to think about cultural manifestations as they related to the students' own

experiences. These smaller writing assignments, in turn, would be used to create longer auto-ethnographic pieces in which the students were required to consider their role in the larger social cultural context. These writings, along with other process and reflective based writings would be included in the students' final portfolio.

Selection of Participants

The participants in this study were selected primarily based on their willingness to participate and the alignment of their class meetings to my own schedule. Although the pedagogy was tried in all fifteen sections of the first course in the first-year writing program, I collected data from only one section. Again, this was done primarily out of pragmatic necessity and because my initial research questions did not require comparing across sections at that time.

After the first week of classes, I randomly selected ten individuals including the instructor and asked them if they wished to participate in the study. All of the individuals I approached agreed to participate in the study at which point I administered the process of informed consent. For this procedure, I read the informed consent form to each potential participant. The form was a standard consent form that specified the responsibilities of the researchers and the rights of the informants as established by federal mandate and monitored by the school's internal review board. At the conclusion of the reading of the consent form, the potential informant was asked if she understood everything and, if, so, to sign the form. Initially, half of the class volunteered to participate in the study, and while this was not intentional, they tended to represent the general student population at the college. Due to schedule conflicts, missing assignments, etc., only data from four focus students, Fatima, Abby, John, Quincy, and

their professor Margie are being presented in the current report. Each participant picked her or his pseudonym during his or her first interview.

With the exception of Fatima and Margie, all of the participants are native New Englanders in their late teens or early twenties. Fatima immigrated as a child and is a non-traditional student in the sense that she is attending college for the first time in her fifties. Margie, the professor, is in her sixties and is originally from the West Coast of the United States. All of the students in the case study represent a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and a representative of various writing proficiency levels.

Data Collection

The primary data source were semi-structured interviews conducted on the focus students and their professor. In addition, students' writing (which included formal and informal assignments, journals, and in-class writing) and in-class observations constituted additional data sources. These methods were important because they provided a means through which the data could be triangulated and as a means to depict the emerging themes and patterns as accurately as possible.

Each participant participated in two semi-structured interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes each. Interviews were conducted in my office and in one of the various lounges on campus. I audio recorded each interview and took hand written notes. There were no pre-established interview questions, as such, but a list of topics that I would discuss with each participant at some point during the interview. The participants were also observed once weekly for 17 weeks in their writing class. Each observation lasted for 50 minutes and was equal to the

length of the course meeting. Participants also participated in 6 informal interviews lasting approximately 15 minutes. These interviews took place during “workshop” times that took place during class meetings. I recorded these informal interviews with recording devices and took hand-written notes.

I also had access to all of the participants’ writing assignments related to the class as well as to the participants’ final portfolio, an artifact containing several shorter pieces of writing and a larger auto-ethnography. Furthermore, I had access to all comments by the instructor related to the students’ writing, as well as access to the journal kept by the instructor throughout the duration of the study. Finally, I had access to the students’ other professors during this and subsequent semesters. Usually, my communication with these other faculty members took place informally during institution-wide faculty meetings, but also occasionally via telephone conversations, emails, and informal office visits.

Data Analysis

The data for this research took the form of field notes, digital audio recordings, and the collection of textual artifacts (student and instructor writings). These were then transcribed using the Transcriptions program designed for Mac computers. Once transcriptions were completed, the data was coded in a two-part fashion (initial or open and focused or axial) as explained by research methodologist Saldana. The initial coding was done initially using the comment feature on the Word program.

For the first step, I highlighted data chunks from the transcribed data and made comments. In keeping with Creswell, initial codes were established for description, context, and

themes for each case. This means, essentially, that I conducted a “cold” examination of the artifacts, transcriptions, and field notes. During this cold examination, I highlighted data chunks that struck me as interesting for whatever reason. My focus here was on descriptions, contextual elements, and themes as they emerged within each case (i.e., elements presented by each participant). For example, when an informant said or wrote anything related to their perception of themselves as a writer that data chunk was labeled “writing-self”. Similarly, if an informant wrote or said anything that was positive regarding the results of a writing endeavor, that chunk was labeled “pride”, and so forth.

For the second step, I grouped the data into larger themes as they related to the research questions. For example, the initial and secondary readings of the data yielded data that fit in well with three major broad themes as established by the research questions. I compared the presented elements from each case with one another across all data sets. In adherence to the inductive nature of Grounded Theory, I used the common emerging elements from all data sets to establish the narrower research questions that I presented earlier in the paper. These focused codes related to identity, confidence, and quality. The connection between the data and the questions were salient in all the collected data. These major themes and serve as the main focus of analysis for this paper.

Findings

Identity/Writing “self”: Research Question One

According to Roz Ivanic, writing is not just about the content of what is written, but also about the image the writer presents. A salient theme in the data was how participating in the auto-ethnography pedagogy related to the way in which the participants established an identity as a writer. All of the participants provided data that supported the notion of a connection between writing, this course, and identity. In some cases, as in the data excerpt below, this was poignant.

Consider the following data from Abby:

TV: What do you think of when you think writing?

Abby: Two things.

TV: Two things?

Abby: Yeah, mostly (laughs)

TV: What are they?

Abby: English class and keeping a journal.

TV: Do you keep a journal?

Abby: Yes.

TV: How long have you kept a journal?

Abby: Since eighth grade.

TV: What's have you thought about that

Abby: Actually, I didn't think about that so much until I started rereading things I wrote during this semester. I went to look for a way to find out about myself and I did.

TV: You found out about yourself? How?

Abby: I found out that I have a voice mostly. And thoughts, and important things to say.

TV: And you just discovered that even though you've been keeping the journal since the eighth grade?

Abby: Maybe I didn't see it before. I dunno. I didn't re-read what I wrote then so much. I might not have re-read now if I didn't feel like it would be a resource.

TV: A resource for the class?

Abby: Yes, for the projects.

(Abby, Interview I, October, 2011)

This excerpt shows that Abby has become aware of a writing identity through activities that she has done in preparation for the creation of her own auto-ethnography. The next excerpt addresses the issue of identity which appeared in one of the shorter pieces in which the participants were asked about what it was like growing up in their homes:

“For most of the time I lived there, my little eccentric corner of Beantown was a source of embarrassment to me. But as the car drove past the quaint unassuming houses on our street I realized this was home.”

(Abby, “Home”- Composition and Rhetoric I, 2011)

Here, the closing of her essay on her home life, Abby seems to have realized how important what she experienced was to her and realizing it was indeed home, she accepts it as a part of who she is.

Fatima was also a writer of sorts before she entered college. Consider the following excerpt:

Fatima: I've always liked to write. I mean when I was a little girl we wrote things a lot. My mother would have dinners and invite people, and she would ask me to write up the menus.

TV: You wrote menus?

Fatima: Yes but not what my mother was going to serve, well not just. I usually wrote it as a poem. I'm not sure if it would work so much in English.

TV: Do you ever write in English

Fatima: Since I came here I always write in English. Poems.

TV: Do you consider yourself to be a writer?

Fatima: Yes.

TV: From even before coming to college?

Fatima: Yes although I wouldn't have called it that.

(Fatima, Interview I, October, 2011)

Fatima also has linked her identity in general as being that of a student. In one writing assignment where the students were asked to write about their experiences coming to college, Fatima wrote the following:

“It was no longer enough to be the good wife and mother. It was not enough to clean house and cook meals. I needed to be more; I needed to know more.”

(Fatima, “Going to College”, Composition and Rhetoric I, 2011)

Fatima was clearly proud of her family. In virtually all communication with her, both in the interviews and in-class conversations she never failed to mention something about the lives of

her husband or one of her children, and more often than not, all three. It is clear, however, in this excerpt, that she wants? to expand her identity to include something else.

John similarly establishes a sense of writing self, but in a somewhat different vein, as illustrated in the following excerpt from his second interview:

TV: What has it been like for you preparing for your auto-ethnography?

John: It's been like seeing myself in 3-D.

TV: 3-D? That's interesting. I've never heard that before. Can you explain?

John: Everyone sees me in one way. My parents, friends, even people that don't know me. I think that is like being 2-D

TV: The writing makes adds another dimension?

John: Yeah, and not so many people see that dimension. I do. Margie does because she reads it.

TV: Have you always felt this 2-D/3-D thing?

John: You know, I think I have. But I didn't really ever keep a journal before this class. I have always thought about things like this, I just haven't really thought about them as such. I think the class has helped me apply words to these feelings. It's like most people see me as this or that, and I see myself as someone else and these words are where that someone else lives.

(John, Interview II, December, 2011)

Both John's identity and sense of writing self seems to be bound together in the transition from thinking about his third dimension to committing those thoughts to paper. This notion of being bound up establishing his sense of identity as both a person and a writer is well illustrated in a

writing assignment that asked the students to write about an event or series of events that lead to a profound self-realization. John wrote:

“I learned that my father and uncles needed the hunt as a way to feel like men; to feel like providers, but I didn’t feel like a provider...I felt like a killer, and the feeling has stayed with me ever since.”

(John, “The Moose Hunt”, Composition and Rhetoric I, 2011)

By positioning himself as being at odds with the cultural significance of the moose hunt in his community, John illustrates how the rejection of a cultural expectation can serve as the basis for a component of a part of one’s identity. The place of identity and writing (along with other literacy practices) is no stranger to the discourse on the subject. Indeed Shirley Brice Heath, David Barton and Mary Hamilton, Tamar El-Or, Hadar Dubowsky-Ma’ayan, and Victoria Purcell Gates, just to mention a few, have increased our understanding in valuable ways on these matters. For these students being a writer in the academy assumes a much more important, all-encompassing role than that of a simply and seemingly unrelated academic subject.

If the writing self is a combination of the writer’s identity as expressed through the writing as well as the sense of purpose with which the writer writes, and the way the sense of contributing personal stories influence the overall product, then it should be clear how participating in this type of pedagogy would foster the creation of a writing self, at least for those individuals who buy into the method behind the pedagogy. The four participants saw themselves as being in the position to positively contribute to their own learning outcomes and because the participants’ contributions were considered in a positive light by their instructor, Margie, this only served to reinforce how they positioned themselves in this framework. This idea, in

general, is supported by the findings of Frank Pajares who examined several pieces of research that noted the relationship between self-efficacy and writing outcomes. It is no surprise that Pajares found, indeed, a strong relationship between this self-efficacy and how well the students on their writing tasks.

The data here suggest that the answer to the first research questions is that students create this writing-self largely through a self-efficacy. It may further be the case that this self-efficacy can be fostered through initial positive (and possibly nurturing) interaction between the student and the instructor. Furthermore, and seemingly related to this sense of self-efficacy, the participants seem to either believe or come to believe in the importance of their contribution to the educative process, all of which is related to Lamborn, Newmann and Wehlage's understanding of the impact of student engagement on the educative process.

Writing Confidence: Revisiting Research Question Two

Another important and prevalent theme in the data was the increased level of confidence the participants gained in relationship to their ability to write. Not only did the participants seem to gain confidence in their abilities, they also seemed to be take ownership of it.

Consider the following excerpt from Quincy:

TV: What are you working on now?

Quincy: I have to write about a loss.

TV: A loss?

Quincy: Yeah, like when someone dies

TV: That's heavy. What did you write about?

Quincy: A friend from high school who died in a car accident last year.

TV: That must be hard.

Quincy: It is. But in a way it's not.

TV: What do you mean?

Quincy: Well, it's a bad thing that happened, but writing about it was good.

TV: How so?

Quincy: Two ways, I think. One was that it felt good to write about it. I never wrote about anything I...I never really wrote about anything that was important to me. Or anything that I cared about so that's one reason.

TV: And the other?

Quincy: The other is that it was good. And the professor liked it. She wrote that she liked it. I never had a teacher write anything like that before. Like in high school back my teachers only wrote what was wrong with it.

TV: How did that make you feel?

Quincy: I didn't want to do it. But Professor Margie is different. I feel good about the work.

TV: What else does she tell you about your work?

Quincy: She tells me where I need to change something. Or if I have done something wrong, but somehow she even makes the things I've done wrong or incorrectly sound positive...

(Quincy, Interview II, December, 2011)

For Quincy, the positive feedback goes a long way in helping him gain confidence. This confidence, while not providing automatic or quick fixes to his writing issues, it allows for a much-needed positive framework to be able to, in Quincy's words, compete. Consider the following:

TV: Do you still need to fix the things she points out?

Quincy: Yeah. And I know that if I don't do it right she will let me know.

TV: Were your teachers in high school like that?

Quincy: No. They were nice, but they never once told me how to fix anything. It was like they assumed I wouldn't fix it. Or that I wouldn't know how to fix it.

TV: How do you learn about making your writing better by her comments?

Quincy: Well, for one thing I know whether I need to just fix like a spelling or sentence mistake, or if it's something more like if something makes sense or not. Margie says the spelling and sentence stuff are "easy mistakes".

TV: How do you think this will help you when you have to write for other classes?

Quincy: Now I think I know what to look for in terms of revising. I know that fixing a paper doesn't just mean spelling and grammar. I know that sometimes I might have to rearrange things and that sometimes I might even have to go back to the beginning and start again. I think that this will help me a lot in other classes. I think the most important thing is that I know how to plan for my writing assignments. Planning well goes a long way.

(Quincy, Interview II, December, 2011)

This understanding of strategies for making writing better is a huge discovery for Quincy, an individual who had constantly been frustrated by writing assignments for this class. For him, the realization that he would know how to plan a writing assignment effectively and that he would also know how to take instructor feedback for improving his grade was a huge step forward in terms of propelling him from being a student with struggles to being a student with the ability to raise his level of academic performance.

Confidence was also important for Fatima, but in a different way. For her part she never once doubted her ability. Others, however, didn't think she would be able to make the transition from being wife and mother to being a student so easily. Consider this excerpt from her essay on coming to college:

“My husband was not so happy at first that I wanted to go to college. It wasn't that he didn't want me away from home. He knew that I was growing restless there since all of the children but one were out of the house and the one that was home was living almost completely independently. He was worried, mostly about how I would fit in. How I would be treated by the others, especially by the teachers. It had been a long time since I was in school and he thought it was certain to have changed a lot.”

(Fatima, “Going to College”, Composition and Rhetoric I, 2011)

The notion of not fitting in appeared again in Fatima's first interview session. Consider:

TV: Why were you worried about not fitting in?

Fatima: It was mostly about knowing how to do things that kids all seem to know these days. Like technology.

TV: Using computers?

Fatima: Yes, but not just computers but also things like the Blackboard program. I wasn't afraid about the academic issues, but only how not being so confident in using the technology might trip me up somehow.

TV: And how is it?

Fatima: It's not as bad as I thought it would be. Nothing has tripped me up so far.

TV: Who helped you figure it out?

Fatima: My son who is still at home, Margie, my classmates, and people in the library.

TV: Do you feel less inhibited about the technology issue?

Fatima: Yes, especially now that I understand it really can't make or break me.

(Fatima, Interview I, October, 2011)

The above data excerpts show that students did gain confidence in their writing ability. These participants clearly feel that whatever they have learned in this class has provided them with the necessary skills in any of the writing tasks they will be required to do in any of their college. I would argue that this establishes sufficient reason for a writing pedagogy based on auto-ethnography.

Writing Quality: Revisiting Research Question Three

The last theme that emerged from the data was that of writing quality. All of the participants felt that their writing quality had improved through activities in the course. Margie was able to verify this.

TV: How would you characterize the quality of student writing in your class, specifically that of the four participants: Abby, Fatima, John, and Quincy?

Margie: Well, I think they have all improved in their writing abilities. And if I consider the quality of their writing from the beginning of the semester to the end I would certainly say they have all improved is one way or the other.

TV: What do you mean by one way or the other?

Margie: No one can or should expect a complete overhaul in student writing ability after just one semester in Composition and Rhetoric, although I know administrators and so forth often do. I think what has to be considered in terms of assessing improvement is looking at whether or not a writing student has established a writing trajectory and whether or not that trajectory can reasonably be carried out after the student leaves the class.

TV: Can you explain that a bit?

Margie: Yes. Take Quincy, for example. I would by no means classify him as a great writer, or even a good one, but compared to where he was I think he has the ability to become great. He has the skills to get through his courses and if he applies what he knows he has the potential to become great. It's not always about punctuation and paragraph structure, that's easy to fix. Establishing a voice is the most important for most of my students, so that's what you work on. I think this pedagogy really helps with that. Punctuation and mechanics are important, but you can teach students strategies for dealing with that.

TV: You really feel confident about this pedagogy?

Margie: I really do. Make no mistake, students who have a history of struggle will still struggle, but they will have the tools to know how to navigate the territory better. And

anyway, for me it's not about teaching mechanics anyway, and as far as I know no widely accepted composition methodology is about that.

TV: What would you say is the most important aspect of this pedagogy?

Margie: The most important thing is they bring the most important aspect of the pedagogy with them. We use text and media to give them examples of things, but really you could teach the course with no materials at all. It's really about their stories and that is what makes it invaluable.

(Margie, Interview II, December, 2011)

This data excerpt illustrates the ways in which the instructor believes that auto-ethnography helps students in writing. It is likewise interesting to note that not only did all four the participants in the present study receive passing scores on their portfolios (passing scores on the submitted portfolios meant, in this context, that the student passes the course unless there is some other issue such as attendance). Similarly, the pass rate for the combined sections jumped from around 63% using the “modes” based pedagogy to around 86% during the first four semesters of the auto-ethnography pedagogy being in use.

Discussion

At the beginning of this study, I sought to describe the experience of a small group of students and their instructor as they embarked on a journey into a required course on college writing that uses a pedagogy based on auto-ethnography. All of the participants in this study

were experiencing something novel and none of them could really know what to expect to get from the experience.

One of the findings suggests that the establishment of the writing self is fostered both by the proximity to the material (their stories) and the investment the participants have in recounting their experiences (telling their stories). Presently, this was encouraged by the nurturing and positive interactions with instructor that cultivated a sense, on the part of the student participants, that they were bringing something of immense value and import to the table. The material was not distant, it did not come from a different time and place, nor was it concerned particularly with conventions of academic standard. This proximity provided the opportunity for these students to assume ownership of their own educative process. The participants were not only very much interested in how their stories were crafted, but also very much in the way they related their truths to their audiences.

Re-visiting the Bartholomae and Elbow debate then is again important in terms of reconsidering the importance of writing identity and what that identity means to writing in any genre. How many students are lost in this sink or swim attitude that requires students to assume the role of a writer in the academy when many of them may not quite understand what it means to have voice, what it means to participate in meaningful discourse, or what it means to be a writer? Writing is essentially the expression of ideas and a pedagogy that provides the opportunity for students to establish an identity as a writer using material they know very well would seem to go a long way in creating more affective college level writing instruction. Indeed if we consider the increased portfolio pass rates that I presented earlier. While not generalizable, it is clear that the pedagogy had beneficial effects on the participants' writing.

Another finding in the current study further suggests that the student participants experienced a boost in their confidence as writers. Assuming that writing instructors share an understanding of the importance of confidence to the learning process, it would seem to an important objective that first year writing programs implement writing pedagogies that provide the opportunity for the cultivation of this confidence. While I would not downplay the importance of the relationship dynamic between instructor and student, I would argue that by acknowledging the student writer as owner of the material that serves as the main unit of analysis, the pedagogy helps create an environment that allows for this elevation of confidence.

Another important aspect of this pedagogy is how it benefits all students regardless of their writing proficiency level. As mentioned earlier, the student participants represented various writing proficiency levels, from those who struggled with writing throughout their schooling experience to those who experienced a relatively high level of academic achievement. It is a practical benefit to consider pedagogies that help bolster confidence in all students and that take the reality that all of our first-year writing students do not start at the same place into consideration. The traditional method of dealing with student writing proficiency levels in the academy has been to classify students as remedial or non-remedial. This system of classification, unfortunately, has done little in the way of truly understanding the disparate nature of academic experience that first year students bring to the modern college writing classroom.

Finally, the data presents evidence that students, indeed, benefitted from participation in this curriculum. In the excerpt from her interview presented earlier in this paper, Margie spoke of a “writing trajectory” that she felt all of the student participants were able to establish as a result of the class. This notion of creating a trajectory is important because it looks beyond the

writing classrooms and considers the impact of the first-year writing class on the whole undergraduate experience.

This study provides evidence that writing curricula can be crafted in such a way as to be beneficial to students at multiple levels of ability within the same classroom. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that participation in the curriculum provided students with a close proximity to the material which allowed them to claim expertise and ownership of the material, as well as provided a means to strengthen their confidence in their endeavors. The pedagogy suggested here requires nothing that does not already exist in great quantities in every college writing classroom in this country. This research contributes to the current discourse concerning pedagogy in writing studies in that it provides further evidence for the importance of personal writing in the writing classroom, the importance of knowledge creation and ownership, and the benefit of lived experience being reflected in curriculum. The new direction it presents, furthermore, takes the form of a challenge to all stakeholders to reconceive college writing curricula in ways that make it both accessible and beneficial to all students, making it an important contribution to the field of writing pedagogy.

Limitations

Like most ethnographies, this study is limited by the inability to generalize its findings. This is especially true when one is dealing with small samples and case studies where it may not be possible to capture the full variation of a population and where the effect of participant drop out is more pronounced. Initially, I administered the informed consent process to ten student participants, but due to time constraints, missing and/or incomplete assignments, and other

factors, not all of the initial informants were able to remain involved in the study until its completion. Having complete data-sets from all ten of the initial student participants would have created a richer collection of data.

Furthermore, again, due to practical constraints, I was not able to track the students' performance in other classes, especially those that require large quantities of writing, in any systematic way. I think doing so may well have provided more substantiating evidence, and would be worth doing so in future research. Finally, the sample could have been expanded to include instructors and students who were enrolled in one of the other sections that were using the same pedagogy as it is very difficult to ascertain how much of the presented evidence is a result of the pedagogy itself, or the teacher-student relationship that was crafted in this particular classroom. Similar studies conducted in the future might include a combination of survey and/or comparative data in addition to the case study approach to obtain a broader picture of the experience of students and instructors when implementing a pedagogical change or innovation. While this study was limited in terms of data size and ability to generalize, it does provide a basis for developing research for further study in the use of auto-ethnography in first year writing programs.

Conclusion and Future Directions

In the future, it would be useful to design a similar study, and perhaps a larger scale study, that follows the participants through a longer period of time, perhaps even all four years of their degree programs. This would provide us with an even clearer picture of how students might apply the skills and insights they acquired while engaging in auto-ethnography. Similarly,

it might be worthwhile to consider how such a pedagogy might be adapted to a population of students, like second language learners, those requiring some degree of remediation, as well as first-generation college students. The self-reflexive identity-work that is at the heart of auto-ethnography might be especially fruitful as a way to engage and retain populations which might be considered “at risk” in gateway courses such as English composition as well as others. As the general guidelines for designing a course based on this pedagogy are relatively relaxed, it should not be too difficult to see how this type of pedagogy could be used for a variety of courses and disciplines, including applied or career fields.

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